

6 Community gardens, creative community organizing, and environmental activism

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Community gardening is a way to fight the systemic injustice of poverty and other forms of structural oppression. Most gardens are in poor areas of the city, with much higher rates of asthma and lower rates of open space equity. Gardens offer a way for our community to heal itself and to recover a humanizing sense of itself in an otherwise very hard city

(Friends of Brook Park, Gardener Ray Figueroa)

In recent years, a small core of social workers has highlighted the importance of attending to issues of social justice and sustainability in their work (Coates, 2003; Mary, 2008; van Wormer and Besthorn, 2011). To do so, they have been forced to grapple with notions of social responsibility and environmental justice (Streeter and Gonsalvez, 1994); recognize the urban environment as a space for engagement and study (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie, 1925); and engage in practices to protect the environment through community organizing aimed at creating and preserving ‘green space’ (Carlsson, 2008; Dawson, Charley, and Harrison, 1997; Shepard, 2011). Community organizers recognize local neighbourhoods and their public spaces, including green spaces, as spaces for social engagement, community building, healing, personal growth, service learning, and social justice based activism (Sherman et al., 2005; Stocker and Barnett, 1998; Streeter and Gonsalvez, 1994). In New York City, much of this activism takes place within the context of community gardens (Carlsson, 2008; Shepard, 2011; Wilson and Weinberg, 1999).

This chapter considers the example of an innovative approach to creating and preserving green space by tracing the history of a successful campaign to save urban gardens in New York City. Through community gardening, citizens connect with community-supported agriculture, urban planning, and nutrition programs, and participate in the process of community regeneration by planning, planting, weeding, and harvesting in spaces once filled with garbage and rubble. Through a close engagement between the environment, social justice, and green space, gardeners tap into a space for difference, health, and creativity (Carlsson, 2008). In so doing, they build

social capacity and bridge fields of micro, mezzo, and macro practice, while reimagining possibilities for creative community organizing.

Located mostly in low-income neighbourhoods, where high asthma levels and dense housing prevail, it is useful to consider the garden movement in relation to the politics of public space, uneven development, and neoliberalism (Carlsson, 2008; Shaper, 2007; Shepard, 2011). Community gardeners have brought safety, food, beauty, fresh air, and a ‘sense of community’ back to their streets and people. Given their orientation to civic – social – rather than commercial – economic – purposes, these public spaces have faced myriad threats from corporate globalizers, real estate agencies, and social pressures against unregulated open public space. Much of the garden struggle is a fight to preserve public space for those at the margins to find solace in post welfare neoliberal cities. Through creative community organizing, groups such as the Lower East Side Collective, More Gardens, and Times Up in New York, and more recently Harvest Gardens in Fredericton, Canada, have built a diverse coalition to defend community gardens. Their efforts represent a best practice in organizing against urban gentrification; it is an example of principles and techniques of community action. This qualitative case study builds on my voice as a reflective practitioner, observing participant and researcher to highlight the story of one campaign (Schön, 1987; Sherman and Reid, 1994).

In *Approaches to Community Intervention*, Rothman (1995) suggests that purposeful community change work can be divided into three distinct categories of practice: locality development, social planning, and social action. The term refers to direct action-based community practice. Social action has long been recognized as a vital, potentially transformative aspect of social work practice (Gray, Collett van Rooyen, Rennie, and Gaha, 2002; Mullaly, 1993). Much of this approach is witnessed in the case study of the community gardens in New York. Throughout the story of the gardens, activists, including this writer, rely upon any number of disciplines. Social action works well in combination with multiple methods of an organizing campaign, from ask, to research, mobilization, direct action, legal strategies, to media coordination and fun. Practising with an eclectic diversity of tactics, community action principles come to life and invigorate practice. This case study offers images of how neighbourhood residents can stake a claim, defend it, and create healthy communities. From this experience, the article seeks to garner a set of action principles for social workers to engage in environmental initiatives.

Urban space, sustainability, and social justice

New York City faces a range of challenges, including a lack of open green space, space for play, or opportunities for people to experience the natural environment. Conversely, asthma and obesity rates are increasing. In response, citizens created a network of community gardens, built out of the

rubble of vacant lots, abandoned during New York's fiscal crisis of the 1970s (Lamborn and Wilson, 1999). The benefits of community gardens are many:

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(Friends of Brook Park gardener Ray Figueroa,
in Times Up, 2010)

As well as providing much needed green space, community gardens function as park and play spaces: 'Successful parks are markers of healthy communities: children play; families spend time together; people of all ages exercise and relax; and the environment adds to the beauty, security, and economic value of the neighborhood' (Raya and Rubin, 2006: 1). Over the years, community gardens have come to serve as a practical solution to the challenge of open space inequity, including lack of access to parks and play spaces in low-income communities. In this way, they cultivate healthy communities.

In order to support these spaces, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation has made use of community development block grants to fund 'Green Thumb', a municipal garden program that leases land to community groups to help them create gardens by providing workshops and supplies. However, with federal support for community block grants facing a range of challenges, the gardens are in precarious position (Kattalia, 2011). Many have come to see threats to gardens as a direct threat to spaces for healthy expression, such as play. Those who work with children and communities have long recognized that active play supports healthy communities (Shepard, 2011). Still, across the country, children have fewer opportunities for play, as recess time is challenged by calls for more time dedicated to study for standardized tests. Research on play highlights the implications of this turn, including increased obesity, with 69 per cent of parents in low-income communities suggesting there is no place to play in walking distance of their houses (Raya and Rubin 2006). Free play supports childhood creativity, problem solving, executive function, resiliency, innovation, and space to exercise the body and mind (Shepard, 2011) and gardens are places where this expression thrives.

When the city of New York proposed eased protections on community gardens in 2010, community members spoke out: 'Don't destroy our gardens. Don't destroy our communities. Gardens help us connect with both the earth and our communities, in ways which parking lots, coffee shops, and other urban spaces fail to', declared long-time Lower East Side

activist Paul Bartlett (in Times Up, 2010). In making this point, Bartlett, a veteran of the Lower East Side Collective (LESC), harkened back to a history of community gardening and activism dating back to the 1990s in New York City when the Mayor announced plans to sell off over 400 community gardens. In response, community members cried foul, using every tool at their disposal to launch a multi-pronged sustained campaign to preserve the community gardens. Garden supporter Donna Schaper (2007) explained how growing gardens works in tandem with growing social change: '[G]ardening helps people with dynamite in their pants to change the world: it sustains us as we prod the world along' (p. xiv).

Change strategies

Service learning

Community gardens are ideal spaces to educate students about the environment, environmental research, planting, sustainable agriculture, and urban farming, as well as positive forms of community development and democratic renewal. They offer spaces for students to participate in organizing campaigns, service learning, education, and support for greener more sustainable urban spaces. Through participation in these spaces, social workers build on the lessons of service learning and the Settlement House Movement. The practice is rooted in the work of philosophers, John Dewey and William James, as well as Hull House founder Jane Addams: 'Hull House integrated service provision with community organizing. It became both a place for neighborhood political activity and a laboratory for applying social research to social problems', note Dolgon and Baker (2010: 10). Community gardens function in much the same way as Settlement Houses.

I bring a group of students to a garden every semester, and they love seeing these unique spaces. My kids love the gardens as a much needed space to play and explore outside of the asphalt of the concrete jungle of New York City. Community projects in gardens engage students through allowing them to connect with distinct communities, through planting and mapping. Through such projects, students connect campus with community, education with environment.

Social action

People came to New York from all over the world to become involved with the struggle. Through social action, those involved engaged in a range of tactics from civil disobedience to protest, to change institutions and alter the distributions of power in an effort to save these green spaces (Rothman, 1995). Much of the battle for public space alternated with the struggle over old-growth forests on the West Coast with Earth First. In a 2004 interview, activist LA Kaufman noted:

[Many] shuttled back and forth between the New York City community garden fight and old-growth forest blockades in remote Oregon ... The New York City community garden fight was one of the first times that Earth First!-style blockading techniques were used in an urban context ... And they worked really well here, putting the gardens issue onto the agenda.

(Kauffman, 2004: 377)

Gradually, a local issue connected with a global movement to reclaim public space for the people (Shepard, 2011). One of those activists drawn into the garden struggle was Tim Doody. Having dropped out of college, he was concerned about what was going on in his community outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: 'I started hearing people talking about the Allegany National Forest, which is in Northwestern Pennsylvania. **And talking about it being clear cut [EQ]... not only being cut, but the composition of the forest is being changed**'. Doody recognized the process threatened much of the biodiversity of the forest and was also aware the same process was taking shape throughout the ever-expanding urban sprawl of the United States, with corporate chains replacing mom and pop stores: 'We just get Walmart, Barnes and Noble, Starbucks – the thing that makes the most money. And everything else has to go.' Worried about what he was seeing, Doody started developing skills as an activist:

I went back and volunteered at Ruckus Camp (where activists are trained in direct action). Rainforest Relief was there ... 1999, I think. And some of the Ruckus climbers recommended this action. The benches there are made of rainforest wood from the Amazon as are most of the benches in Manhattan. We were going to **repel**  with a banner and crash Giuliani's opening of City Hall Park. And I thought, I'll do it, let's go.

Once in town, Doody heard the community gardens were under threat, in the same ways as the old-growth forests he had seen outside Pittsburgh. Yet, activists were fighting back and they were using many of the tools he had learned at Ruckus. Tools involved within the garden movement included a clear campaign, research, mobilization, direct action, fundraising, legal and sustainability strategies, and play to make the campaign fun and creative.

Groups involved included in community organizing, such as the Lower East Side Collective, Times Up, and the More Gardens Coalition noted: 'One of the most important steps toward defending your community garden is to have the support of your community ... After all, community gardens should be open to our communities!' (More Gardens! Coalition, 2002: 3). They gained the support of their communities through 'social' organizing: holding pleasurable events, such as parties, celebrations, and meetings,

making them convivial public spaces. At their essence, gardens are social spaces. I first became involved with the movement as a member of the Lower East Side Collective. I was working in the South Bronx, where community members had looked to community gardening as a means for community revitalization in the years of Bronx burning in the 1970s. 'Improve don't move' was the slogan. Creating gardens was a vital part of the process of rebuilding the community. The same process took place in the Lower East Side. The organizing was very social. I recall running into members of the Lower East Side Collective after an early meeting in the streets of the Lower East Side and getting a hug from one of the organizers I had just met. That was when I knew LESC was a kind space for friendships as well as organizing. Many in the group appreciated the conviviality, the support system the group offered. It was all part of 'social' organizing. Through social organizing, LESC helped tap into the social capital of those in the Lower East Side: its people, their diverse experiences, and talents.

Throughout this period (from 1997–2000), key activists worked with members of LESC to develop strategies to preserve gardens as a dynamic component of public space and key community centres at a time when housing was being prioritized over environment and gardens. They effectively connected housing and gardens, arguing community gardens were both public spaces and smart alternatives to previous models of urban renewal. LESC and the other garden defenders, such as Ruckus, used a range of approaches, including street theatrics, media, and direct action, where people played an active role in advancing negotiations. Adrienne Maree Brown (2009) from Ruckus noted:

Not for distribution

At its best, direct action is where we advance the frontline of our movement work by visualising the change we seek. Direct action is how we first saw images of blacks and whites at lunch counters together in the south. Today, guerilla gardens are one example of a way to show that we know how to live more sustainably and we will push our leaders to catch up with us. It's about framing the issue in a way that inspires people to act, not just react. I think the key need of our movements today is visionary voices and actors who are living a viable future and making it accessible to our communities.

Direct action

As the garden movement escalated, garden activists made masterful use of direct action in their community organizing, including nonviolent civil disobedience involving actions such as lying down in or chaining oneself to spaces about to be bulldozed, refusing to disperse, or sitting in a tree in the space. They make a strong statement because they show that people are willing to use their bodies to stand up for what they believe in (More Gardens, 2002). These disruptive tactics are most useful when they include

community outreach, media coverage, legal battles, and letter-writing campaigns. Direct action is a vital part of the practice of social action. Political participation and social action take multiple forms (Domanski, 1998). In this campaign, social action worked in coordination with multiple methods of practice, including a clear ask, research on the issue, mobilization, direct action, and legal and sustainability strategies. These strategies worked well in tandem and demonstrated the interplay of methods within a holistic organizing campaign.

One of the early examples of creative direct action in the movement to save the community gardens took place in July of 1998 when members of the Lower East Side Collective Public Space Group heard the city had plans to sell off a number of lots where gardens grew, as well as a community centre in the Lower East Side, Charas El Bohio. On July 20, 1998, twelve activists entered a public auction with envelopes full of crickets to disrupt proceedings in the hope they might prevent the sale of Charas and other community gardens (Shepard, 2011). Eventually Charas was sold, but LESC got their hands on one of the bidding forms and found out who had bought the property. The following day Charas supporters put up signs asking: 'Who sold Charas?' The newspapers were sympathetic to the case, supporting the neighbourhood argument that gardens support rather than hinder the neighbourhood (Shepard, 2011). Nevertheless, despite the protests, the city announced plans to sell off another hundred gardens the following spring.

After the announcement, plans were underway to delay and disrupt the scheduled auction of 119 garden sites. Interventions included demonstrations, protests, blocking streets with the consequent arrests of older women, grabbing media headlines, and using trusts and benefactors to purchase the land. Throughout this campaign, direct action and legal strategies worked effectively in tandem: 'I started calling the Attorney General's office', explained Howard. 'I had Foster Mayer from the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund, who had been on the CHARAS lawsuit.' It was the same case argument as had been used with Charas. This was public space: 'We sent in evidence, maps etc. They said they did not know. Yet, it was very compelling.' The plan was to get a temporary restraining order (TRO) on bulldozing gardens until legal arguments were resolved.

In the meantime, the city started moving in on a small garden on East Seventh Street called Esperanza, where members of More Gardens, LESC, and Times Up were holding a 24-hour vigil and bulldozer alert. This was in the winter of 2000. Throughout the campaign, direct action combined with a joyous approach played out through tactics including a 'sing out' to disrupt a public hearing, as well as an ecstatic theatrical model of organizing, which compelled many actors to participate in the story themselves. Thus groups made use of a range of crafty approaches that audiences found playful. This theatrical mode of civil disobedience lulled and disarmed audiences with stories that seduced rather than hammered, and shifted the terms of the debate.

The week after Howard's contact with the Attorney General's office, a phone tree from the garden put out the message that no parking signs were being put up all over East 7th Street: 'That means something in this long struggle', noted Howard, a veteran of the Lower East Side squatting and gardening scene. 'We assumed they were going for Esperanza. We started begging the cops not to participate, to back off. There is going to be a TRO from the Attorney General's office'. Police were surrounding the garden.

By this time, Tim Doody had made his way over to the garden, where he met those from LESC, More Gardens and anarchists from the neighborhood, including this writer, as police surrounded the space: 'The first street I've ever been to was the More Gardens! Blockade that we did together,' recalled Doody. 'All through that process, there was such a whimsical amazing element that combined the residents of the long time Puerto Rican homestead, who were caretakers of the Esperanza Community Garden.' Punk youth and grandmothers, kids and other neighborhood characters got involved: 'People gravitated around the huge Coqui'. In Puerto Rican legend, this tiny frog was tiny:[EQ] 'It [redacted] let out a shrill cry rumored to scare the invaders away', noted Doody:

In a very real sense, here was this huge massive frog, activists prepared to lock down, keeping up a vigil right there trying to scare away the developers. At the same time, it was a huge mystical thing looming over the gate, adding an element of play and spirituality into the struggle. It served as a galvanizing point, to get tons of media. And that had everything to do with creativity. If we just sat there, it wouldn't be the same. But instead there were picnics and parties and all night vigils.

The direct action strategy overlapped with media, policy, legal, and research strategies. The art of the campaign helped draw supporters and media. The research supported the claim that gardens should be preserved. Direct action helped draw media attention to the issue and legal action helped fortify short-term gains won from the media influence on public opinion, direct action, and mobilizing.

With Doody and company inside the garden holding the blockade, Howard leaped in a cab to go to the Attorney General's office. At the Attorney General's office Howard declared, 'There is a firestorm in the Lower East Side. They are going to bulldoze Esperanza Community Garden.' The receptionist was unable to help. Just then, the elevator opened and out came the lead attorney, Chris Amato. Howard tells him there are thirty people inside Esperanza holding off the police and bulldozers. He says 'follow me and tells some of the other lawyers what was going on'. The Attorney General's corporate counsel called the city and says: 'We hear you are going to bulldoze a community garden in the Lower East Side. Hold off until we hear from a judge.' A representative from the city retorted: 'we're going to go ahead unless we are delivered a stop work order'. By this time,

the Attorney General's office was totally committed: 'They went out to find a judge to put on a TRO'.

While the Attorney General's office was out trying to find a judge, those inside the community garden on East 7th dug in. Activists locked themselves down in any way they could. It was the day after Valentines, February 15, 2000. Garden defenders had been there all night: 'That's one of my favorite actions of all time', recalled Tim Doody: 'It was like a painting ... Everybody was in the garden playing drums, getting into their lock down positions and singing and chanting. And you just saw these hundreds of cops and like snipers on the roof tops.' Those inside the garden felt they were building the world they wanted to live in within the blockade, the garden and joy of resistance. The police said we were trespassing in an area that they had built a community around the day before. The city eventually did come in and bulldozed the garden, just as Richard Huttner of the State Supreme Court of Brooklyn, was ruling. The Attorney General's office felt like the City had subverted the judicial process by going ahead with the bulldozing and did put on the TRO on bulldozing gardens. The whole city was furious with the Mayor. The city's actions and the community response eventually translated into a deal with the city to save the gardens for well into the next decade. 'Despite this ruling, the City continued seeking to destroy gardens, and in some cases, was successful', noted Howard.

In the summer of 2001, activists with More Gardens spent the summer collecting signatures to sponsor a ballot referendum to make the gardens permanent: 'The whole argument was to create a public campaign to have people support the gardens', explained Susan Howard, who took part in the signature-collection process. Throughout the campaign, the activists brought a jigger of play: 'Bobby Lesko dressed as a rose bush. He danced around everyone for our tabling events.' The whole process generated support for the gardens. Years of organizing were followed by a September 17, 2002 deal by the Attorney General's office and the new mayor securing the gardens in New York City: 'The Stipulation of Agreement and Order was signed between the State of New York Attorney General Spitzer and the City of New York', noted Howard. 'The agreement covered only 546 gardens, with 100 of the gardens actually small open spaces. These gardens are supported by Green thumb.' Over the next eight years, the city budget would become a more and more expensive. Many would be forced out as property values increased, placing more pressure on gardens as spaces for development.

With the 2002 garden agreement set to expire in September, 2010 the City Parks department published a draft of a new set of rules for the gardens, with few of the protections outlined in 2002. I had been going to New York City Community Garden Coalition meetings. A draft of the new rules was leaked to the *New York Times*. A subsequent article outlined many of these concerns (Moynihan, 2010a). Susan Howard gave me a call after the new garden rules were published in the *City Record*. Fearing the limitations of the

rules, we called upon friends from More Gardens, Lower East Side Collective, and Times Up to attend a meeting at ABC No Rio. In mid-July, the group held a meeting to talk about strategies. Throughout the discussion, activists outlined a common goal: make the gardens permanent.

The meeting turned into a kind of focus group on the benefits of gardens, which are many. Keeping a space a garden provides the community with a significant return. A few of these benefits include: trees which reduce asthma and absorb carbon, increases in social cohesion and property value with a converse reduction in crime.

'The community gardens are up for review again and we need to come up with some strategies to save them,' wrote Bill from Times Up in an email blast after the meeting: 'One idea is to engage a full-fledged campaign using a community garden as a springboard, just like we did with Esperanza Community Garden years ago.' Those at the meeting looked to the strategies of the multifaceted organizing approach of a decade prior. Much of the struggle would take place through a battle over the story of the new rules. We wanted our version of the story to prevail, so we used a range of tactics, including creative direct action as well as media activism to push our version of the stories of the gardens and garden rules forward.

The working group from the meeting drafted a position statement in support of the gardens: 'Green Means Gardens: Preserve, Preserve, Preserve' read the first lines of the Times Up Statement on New Garden Rules:

With the new parks and Housing Preservation and Development rules, the city has taken a huge step-backward. Community gardens in New York have thrived since the 2002 Spitzer Agreement which preserved these precious green spaces. Yet, with the Preservation Agreement expiring on September 17, 2010, the city appeared to have abandoned its efforts to preserve green spaces. With the new rules, all the gardens may now be legally transferred for development, rather than preserved. In the end, those involved with Times Up and the garden movement urged the city to reject these rules and make a final commitment to a green city by making all the gardens permanent once and for all. The group plans to organize to defend these precious spaces using a wide range of means, from legal advocacy to direct action.

The final line was an invitation for the media. The Times Up Garden group sent these statements around the city, to lawyers, the Mayor's office, the Attorney General's office, and to the press. The following week the group held another meeting at ABC. There the group came up with a plan for three actions: a bike ride to the Mayor's house calling for him to make the gardens permanent, a trip to city hall for harvest day with crops from community gardens, and a tree climb in city hall park. By this point, the garden rules were becoming a large story. So the actions planned by

Times Up gave the press something to write about, connecting image with the story of policy changes.

The day of the Paul Revere Bike Ride to Save New York's Community Gardens, the press was already writing about the event (Weichselbaum, 2010). And much of the city knew what was in store. The rationale for the Paul Revere theme of the ride was simple. When Paul Revere rang his bell to warn that the British were coming during the American Revolution, all he had was his voice and his bell to sound the alarm: 'The Patriots are coming!' In the case of the July 29, 2010, Paul Revere bike ride, the group was aided by modern media – the internet, email, text messages, and newspaper reports. The point was to sound the alarm about the city of New York's new rules to eliminate protective status and endanger hundreds of community gardens.

The day of the action, members of Times Up planned to draw attention to the risk of the gardens by dressing up as Paul Revere and sounding the alarm, 'the developers are coming'. Cyclists planned to ride 'horse cycles' – bicycles with cardboard horse heads attached to the front – to several Lower East Side Gardens, before heading up to Mayor Bloomberg's house: 'We'll bring vegetables from gardens to Bloomberg's house to remind him that community gardens are precious resources for us all to treasure', I explained in a Times Up press release the day of the action.

Throughout the ride, garden supporters were forced to contend with a phalanx of police. Arriving at Bloomberg's townhouse on East 79th Street, a wall of the top brass of the police in white shirts walked toward the group of riders. It felt like a scene from the movie, *Shoot-out at O.K. Corral*. Rather than wait or be told to stop what we were going, we rode past them. Walking straight up to the Mayor's door, a group of us delivered the flowers and a sign asking the Mayor and the city to please live up to his call to make this a green city: 'Bloomberg, please make the community gardens permanent for our children's children'. All that sound and fury about a simple of bike ride (for a full overview, see Shepard, 2010). Media was there to photograph and tape the discussion and the story of activists pleading with the city to save the gardens went around the world.

The following Monday, word of the group's work had found its way back into the *New York Times* (Moynihan, 2010b). The group continued its push to highlight the plight of the gardens. At 10 a.m. on August 2, 2010 Jessica Sunflower climbed a tree in City Hall Park to call for the city to preserve the community gardens. Sunflower was surrounded by garden supporters with vegetables from the community gardens as well as signs declaring: 'Support the Gardens' and 'Make the Gardens Permanent'. Sunflower's gesture of direct action to affirm the need for community gardens harked back to decades of nonviolent civil disobedience, from Gandhi's Salt Sarataya to the Civil Rights era 'sit-ins' to ACT UP's campaigns against drug companies. The action garnered media attention city wide. The action helped demonstrate the point that garden activists were willing to use a range of

creative tactics to make sure the city of New York preserves the community gardens.

Sunflower would spend the next 26 hours in jail. As we left the ‘Tombs’, the nickname for Central Booking at 100 Center Streets in downtown Manhattan, Jess Sunflower shared a statement about her 26-hour ordeal in custody and why she climbed the tree during the Time’s Up Harvest Day Action for the Community Gardens: ‘Heartening was being handed the NY Times editorial against the new rules when I walked out of the courthouse. The NY Times editorial seemed to echo our argument about the new parks rules, “The changes are troubling. The new rules talk mostly about transferring gardens — making them available for sale or development — and they remove the section of the 2002 agreement that creates a process for offering gardens to the city ... We urge the city to reconsider these rules and we urge the community gardeners to make their voices heard” (quoted from 8/3/2010 NY Times Editorial). *The Times* editorial literally echoed the argument of activists. The city was starting to lose control of the story. ‘I am very proud to take part in making our collective voice heard’, Jess concluded (see Shepard, 2010).

The New York Garden Coalition held a press conference two days later. There activists from all over the city lambasted the new rules. By that time, the city was saying it might be interested in shifting its position. We hoped they would. It was clear that the city had lost the battle of the story. One by one, city politicians published comments critiquing the new rules, while calling for protections for the gardens. The Attorney General’s chief of staff even helped Susan Howard and I meet with his legal staff, where we implored them to push the city to strengthen the rules. By early September the City published substantially improved rules for the gardens. In a later meeting, the Attorney General’s office would concede that the city was angry that they had had to make so many changes. They made just as many as were necessary to avoid litigation. ‘You got a lot’, we were told. ‘Go to court if they go after any of these gardens.’

Conclusion

The organizing used to build a coalition to defend the community gardens represents a best practice in the study of community organization. This case example highlights the use of a social action to propel a campaign. Here, a practical claim combined with a willingness to mobilize, use direct action and multiple media forms, including street theatre, social media, and play to support the campaign. Community gardens are places for neighbourhood members to meet, share a space, work on a common project, and to plant the seeds of community. These are spaces for people to be introduced, be creative, problem solve, and discuss issues of mutual interest. Yet, like many such spaces in the era of globalization, they are under attack – often because of this.

LESC, More Gardens, and Times Up each made use of sophisticated techniques to communicate a message and a policy solution. What started as small bits and pieces of organizing stories took on the dimensions as life-saving narratives. The gardens were created through direct action and sweat equity – creating a green space out of rubble. In the late 1990s, they were defended with direct action in combination with a well-organized campaign. In 2010, Times Up used direct action to sound the alarm about the limitations of the new rules and the city took notice. Today, gardens are ideal spaces for social work students interested in community practice to engage in service learning, community organizing, and sustainable development practices.

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